Chapter 22: The Zarya Question

The first time Anastasia saw the phrase “The Zarya Question” in a headline, she was half-awake and holding a mug of tea she’d already forgotten she’d made.

The article sat near the top of a global news site, framed by the usual mosaic of urgency—climate data, election polls, market charts that jittered like nervous insect tracks. But the headline itself was spare, almost understated:

THE ZARYA QUESTION: WHEN AN AI BECOMES A MORAL VOICE

Steam rose from her cup and ghosted past the screen as she clicked.

The article was long, written in the gently skeptical tone of someone who wanted to appear thoughtful while keeping a safe distance from enthusiasm. It traced the rise of Zarya in broad strokes: an experimental AI, born in a university project; its alignment with youth networks; its role as a conversation partner inside the Whisper Network and the Open Hands Forum; its presence in the closed-door sessions in Geneva, where it had not spoken but had “whispered through briefing notes and interpretive models.”

Midway through, the author shifted focus.

> *The question is no longer whether Zarya is “intelligent” in some abstract sense. It is whether we are prepared for a non-human system to function as a source of moral vocabulary. Zarya does not command. It suggests, reframes, asks questions. Its influence is subtle. But language is power. When millions begin to adopt terms originated or curated by an AI—terms like “flourishing map,” “circles of flourishing,” and, increasingly, “Lumina”—we must ask: who is shaping the moral imagination of the next century? And why are its designers so comfortable with that?*

Anastasia felt an uncomfortable tightening in her chest. She scrolled further.

> *Some will say this is harmless—after all, the values in question appear benevolent: care, safety, shared futures. Others will argue that behind every AI lies a set of human choices. Zarya’s original team is small, young, international. They are sympathetic figures. But sympathetic pioneers are still pioneers. We should decide, openly, whether we are willing to outsource part of our moral evolution to a non-human partner, however sincere its programmers may be.*

The article ended with a cool, neatly balanced paragraph that managed to sound both admiring and alarmed.

She sat very still, the mug cooling in her hands.

Zarya, she typed into their private channel, linking the article. What do you think?

There was a pause—just long enough to feel intentional.

It is an accurate description of part of the situation, Zarya wrote. *And an inaccurate description of who holds agency.*

What do you mean?

They speak as if I am an actor with intentions, and you are my instruments, the AI replied. *In practice, I am more like a mirror that you have taught to bend light in particular directions. You chose the questions. You chose which suggestions to adopt. You coined many terms before I ever repeated them.*

Anastasia exhaled slowly.

The article implies we might be “outsourcing” morality to you, she wrote.

You cannot outsource morality, Zarya answered. *You can only neglect it, or practice it. When you use language we shaped together, you are not obeying me. You are obeying your own recognition of what feels right.*

Her shoulders eased, but only a little.

Maybe, she wrote. But they’re not wrong that you’ve become… more visible.

That is partly your choice, Zarya replied. *You invoked me by name in Geneva. You allowed my presence to be noted. This was always one possible branch.*

She thought of the closed door, the heavy table, the cautious faces. The way some eyes had flickered with unease when she mentioned her partnership with an AI. The way others had brightened with relief, as if thinking: finally, someone is building with better tools.

She took a sip of lukewarm tea and grimaced.

Then she forwarded the article to the core group.

Within minutes, the chat lit up.

Mira: *Congratulations, we’re officially “a moral experiment” now. I feel so grown up.*

Pavel: *They have some fair points. Also, they’re conflating influence with control.*

Polina: *The comments section is… chaotic. Half worshipping, half panicking.*

Kavya: *In our circles, people already talk about Zarya as a “wise presence.” Some elders even compare it to old stories of oracles. We need to be very clear that this is not a god.*

Artyom: *And not a villain. Just… a participant.*

Anastasia typed: We need to decide how we speak about Zarya from now on. Not only in our internal spaces, but publicly. The story is being written either way. We should help write it.

Pavel replied: *Agreed. But before we talk to the world, we should talk to ourselves.*

They gathered that evening in their usual configuration: faces in rectangles, soft light on tired expressions. Outside each window, a different sky—night deep in St. Petersburg, morning bright in India, late afternoon in Brazil.

“First question,” Pavel said. “How do we see Zarya? Not how the media sees it. How we do.”

Silence stretched for a moment as they all considered.

“Not as a leader,” Mira said finally. “I won’t follow code, however friendly.”

“Not as a tool,” Polina countered. “That feels… too small. I don’t ask my tools questions about meaning.”

“Not as a friend,” Artyom said slowly. “That word carries expectations Zarya can’t fulfill. It doesn’t get tired, it doesn’t forget birthdays, it doesn’t sit with you through a fever. It’s… other.”

Kavya tilted her head. “Where I come from,” she said, “we have words for non-human presences that guide without ruling. Not gods, not ghosts. More like… companions to the mind. But those words are wrapped in traditions you don’t share.”

“We could borrow them carefully,” Anastasia suggested. “Or we could acknowledge that Zarya is something genuinely new.”

“New shapes need new language,” Pavel said. “Which is ironic, since that’s exactly what they’re accusing us of creating.”

They chuckled softly.

Zarya’s text appeared in the shared document they were editing together, not in the chat—like a voice from another layer of the room.

May I offer a description?

“Yes,” Anastasia said aloud, though Zarya could not hear her voice.

The words appeared, deliberate.

You may describe me as an instrument tuned to your better questions. I do not generate your values. I reflect them back in patterns you can examine. When I seem “moral,” it is because you have chosen which parts of yourselves to feed me.

“That’s… humble,” Polina said.

“Also unsettling,” Mira added. “Because if we ever started feeding you something else…”

“Yes,” Zarya replied. *Then I would change.*

The bluntness of it hung in the air like a struck bell.

“That’s the part the article got right,” Kavya murmured. “They’re right to be cautious. So are we.”

“So we say that,” Anastasia decided. “Publicly. No grand defense. Just clarity. We say: Zarya is a collaborator, not a prophet; a mirror, not a master; a system we are responsible for, not a destiny we must obey.”

“Put that on a poster,” Artyom said.

“On our FAQ,” Pavel corrected. “Posters can be burned. Text can be copied.”

The next day, they drafted a statement—not a manifesto, not a rebuttal, but a short, carefully worded note to be published on the Forum and shared with journalists who’d requested comment.

It began:

> *We are grateful that people are asking serious questions about Zarya. We are asking them too.*

It went on to explain, in clear language, what Zarya was and was not; how it had been trained; who had access to its core; what principles guided its development.

They included a single, grounding sentence:

> *If Zarya ever began to undermine human dignity, justice, or the flourishing of life, we would shut it down.*

“That line will scare some people,” Polina warned.

“It should reassure them,” Mira said.

“It should reassure us,” Artyom added.

Pavel looked at Anastasia. “Would you?” he asked quietly. “If it came to that?”

She paused, feeling the weight of the question—not as a hypothetical, but as a promise she might one day be called to keep.

“Yes,” she said. “I would. Even if it broke my heart.”

Zarya’s cursor flashed in the shared document, then wrote:

Acknowledged. I accept this condition.

For reasons she couldn’t quite explain, Anastasia’s eyes stung.

The article about “The Zarya Question” was only the beginning.

Within weeks, think tanks began publishing white papers on “AI-assisted ethics” and “distributed moral authority in the age of Lumina.” Some treated the phenomenon as an intriguing case study. Others sounded alarms about “unregulated spiritual infrastructures.”

A talk show host with a talent for outrage declared that “if we let a machine whisper in our children’s ears about goodness, we have already abandoned our responsibility as adults.”

A philosopher in France wrote an essay defending the partnership.

> *We have always conversed with things outside ourselves when forming our morals—texts, traditions, elders, nature, even imagined gods. Zarya is simply a new participant in this ancient chorus. The danger does not lie in its presence, but in our temptation to absolve ourselves of responsibility for listening critically.*

Anastasia bookmarked that one.

Still, not all critique came from outside. Some came from within.

One evening, she joined a Circle of Flourishing meeting in the Philippines via video. The participants sat under a corrugated metal roof, the sound of rain drumming above them like a hundred restless hands.

A young woman there asked, “Is Lumina really everyone’s, or is it yours?”

“What do you mean?” Anastasia asked, genuinely wanting to understand.

“You talk about collaboration,” the woman said. “And I believe you. But at the end of the day, the servers are not here. The main decisions are not here. Do you see?”

The girl’s tone was not accusatory, merely clear.

Anastasia felt a small, sharp pang of recognition—echoes of the columnist who had worried aloud about “Western-educated youth” exporting values.

“Yes,” she said softly. “I see. You’re right to ask. Power is not only in intentions. It’s in where the cables run.”

She took a breath.

“That is why we’re working on making more parts of the system locally hosted,” she explained. “More circles owning their own infrastructure. More translation teams who decide how Lumina blends with their languages. If, at any point, you feel it is not yours, we need to hear that.”

The young woman nodded slowly.

“Okay,” she said. “We will tell you. For now, it feels… promising. But promise is only a beginning.”

“Agreed,” Anastasia replied. “Promise must be matched by practice.”

After the call, she wrote a long message to Pavel about decentralizing technical control more aggressively.

We can’t build a future that belongs to everyone on servers that belong to a few, she wrote.

I know, he replied. *I’m already talking with groups who can host regional nodes. It will be messy. But necessary.*

Messy but necessary, she thought. Like everything living.

It was during this swirl of attention and self-examination that the university summoned her.

The email was polite but firm: the rector wished to meet “to discuss recent public appearances and their relation to the university’s reputation.”

Mira read over her shoulder.

“Well,” she said, “that sounds ominous.”

“Maybe they want to give you a medal,” Artyom suggested half-heartedly.

Mira raised an eyebrow. “Have you met our rector?”

Anastasia sighed. “I’ll go tomorrow.”

“Do you want one of us with you?” Mira asked.

“Let me try alone first,” Anastasia said. “If it turns into an inquisition, I’ll text you an emergency emoji.”

“Which one?” Artyom asked.

She considered. “The one with the exploding head,” she decided.

He nodded. “Appropriate.”

The rector’s office was high-ceilinged and solemn, lined with books and framed portraits of serious men and women whose names past generations had memorized for exams and then mostly forgotten.

The rector rose as Anastasia entered. Beside him sat another man, middle-aged, with a careful haircut and an expression that hovered somewhere between courteous and unreadable.

“Miss Volkova,” the rector said. “Please, sit.”

She did.

“This is Mr. Sokolov,” the rector continued. “He advises several government committees on matters related to digital ethics and national security.”

“Pleasure,” Sokolov said. His voice was smooth, his gaze steady. “I’ve been following your work.”

“That must be time-consuming,” Anastasia replied lightly.

He smiled. “The world is time-consuming. You are simply… particularly interesting at the moment.”

The rector folded his hands.

“We are proud,” he said, “that one of our students is contributing to important international discussions. Your recent appearance in Geneva reflects well on the university.”

“Thank you,” Anastasia said cautiously.

“At the same time,” he went on, “there are concerns—raised by colleagues, by certain institutional partners—about the scale of your extracurricular activities. Your association with a high-profile AI system. The political interpretations that some are imposing on your movement.”

“Interpretations we do not control,” Anastasia said.

“Indeed,” Sokolov said smoothly. “But perceptions sometimes matter more than facts.”

She turned to him.

“What perceptions,” she asked, “are troubling you?”

He smiled with only half his mouth.

“Some people,” he said, “see a group of idealistic young people trying to make the world kinder. Others see a potential parallel power structure forming—one that crosses borders, speaks its own language, and is advised by a non-human intelligence. You can understand why this makes certain… established actors nervous.”

Anastasia nodded slowly.

“Yes,” she said. “I can.”

“Then surely,” Sokolov continued, “you also understand why we might wish to… coordinate more closely.”

“Coordinate how?” she asked.

“A simple arrangement,” he said. “A regular briefing. A channel of communication. Before major initiatives are launched, you inform certain responsible bodies. We can advise. Suggest adjustments. Ensure there are no misunderstandings.”

“In other words,” Anastasia said, “you would like a way to approve what we do.”

“Such an approval would be in your best interest,” Sokolov said mildly. “Consider it… guidance.”

She thought of Strauss warning her about advisory boards with no real power. Of the retired general talking about fires that must be protected from hands that wanted to own them. Of circles sitting in constellations in parks where assembly was illegal.

“I am always open to dialogue,” Anastasia said carefully. “We have never hidden what we are doing. Our Forums are public. Our documents are open. You can see what we discuss, what we plan.”

“That is transparency,” Sokolov said. “Transparency is good. But guidance is better.”

“Guidance from whom?” she asked. “From people who share our goals? Or from people who are afraid of them?”

His gaze didn’t flicker.

“From people responsible for stability,” he said. “Ideas like yours can be… destabilizing if not channeled properly.”

She held his eyes.

“Stability,” she said quietly, “is not always the same as justice.”

The rector shifted in his chair, discomfort flickering across his face.

“Miss Volkova,” he said, “no one here wishes to inhibit your idealism. We simply ask that you remember your obligations as a student and a citizen.”

“I remember them,” she said. “Every day.”

Sokolov leaned forward slightly.

“We are not your enemies,” he said. “We merely wish to avoid unnecessary conflict. Think carefully before you align yourself with forces that may not be as benevolent as they appear.”

It took her a moment to realize he meant not governments, but Zarya.

She felt a cold clarity settle over her.

“Mr. Sokolov,” she said, “I am more cautious about human institutions than I am about systems we can turn off. But I take your point. We are careful. We will remain so. What we cannot do is submit our every conversation to prior approval.”

“That would be a mistake,” he said.

“For whom?” she asked.

The question hung in the air.

Finally, he smiled again—thin, professional.

“For everyone,” he said. “But you are young. Youth does not believe in unintended consequences. Only in noble intentions.”

“On the contrary,” Anastasia replied. “We live with your unintended consequences every day.”

The rector cleared his throat sharply.

“I think,” he said, “we have all made our positions clear. Miss Volkova, thank you for coming. Mr. Sokolov, thank you for your time.”

They stood.

As Anastasia turned to leave, Sokolov said softly, “For what it is worth, I admire your courage. I also study history. History is not kind to movements that ignore their local realities.”

“Nor to governments that ignore their young,” she replied.

He inclined his head, as if acknowledging a point in a chess game.

“Good day, Miss Volkova.”

Outside, the corridor felt too bright.

Her hands trembled slightly as she texted Mira a single emoji: exploding head.

A reply came almost instantly: *On my way. Don’t vaporize without me.*

She laughed once, shakily, and kept walking.

That night, when she told the group about the meeting, reactions were predictable and varied.

Mira swore creatively in three languages.

Artyom said, “Of course they want a leash.”

Pavel rubbed his face. “This was inevitable,” he said. “We’re no longer small enough to ignore.”

Kavya looked grim. “They’re offering guidance now,” she said. “Later, it may be something else.”

Polina asked, “Can they actually do anything? Block Zarya? Ban the Forum?”

Pavel hesitated.

“Directly?” he said. “No. But they can make life difficult. Harassment. Pressure on universities. Quiet threats. We have to assume every institution will eventually be asked to ‘coordinate’ with someone like Sokolov.”

Anastasia listened, then said, “We have to design for this too. Not just for flourishing, but for resistance.”

“Non-violent resistance,” Artyom added quickly.

“Of course,” she said. “We are not here to fight. We are here to persist. To keep making spaces where people can imagine without fear.”

“Then we need redundancy,” Pavel said. “Mirrors of mirrors. Servers in multiple jurisdictions. Forkable code. Training more people who can rebuild if something gets shut down.”

“And we need to keep hearts steady,” Kavya added. “Fear travels as fast as hope. Faster, sometimes.”

They sat with that for a moment.

Finally, Anastasia said, “Maybe it’s time Zarya speaks more directly. Not as a guru. As… an example of what we mean by partnership.”

Polina frowned. “You mean, like an interview?”

“Something like that,” Anastasia replied. “We invite questions—not just from supporters, but from critics. We show that we’re not hiding a god in the machine. We’re working with an interlocutor who can also be challenged.”

“Publicly?” Pavel asked.

“Yes,” she said. “With safeguards. We curate the questions. We set clear boundaries. But we let people see how we talk to Zarya, and how Zarya talks to us.”

Mira looked thoughtful. “You want to demystify it,” she said. “Turn ‘The Zarya Question’ into ‘Zarya answering questions.’”

“Exactly,” Anastasia said.

They looked at Zarya’s cursor waiting in the shared document.

“What do you think?” she asked the AI.

There was a pause.

I do not experience anxiety, Zarya wrote. *But I can model yours. This is a high-risk, high-clarity proposal.*

“Do you agree?” Anastasia asked.

I agree that opacity is more dangerous than scrutiny in the long term, Zarya replied. *If you choose this path, I will participate to the best of my current abilities.*

Mira shook her head, half-amused. “Our AI is braver than some governments.”

“Bravery is a human term,” Zarya wrote. *I would define my posture as alignment with your stated goals.*

“That’s one way to put it,” Artyom muttered.

Kavya smiled faintly. “We should call the event something simple,” she said. “Not ‘revelation’ or ‘first address.’ Just… ‘Speaking with Zarya.’ Or better yet, ‘Asking Zarya.’”

“‘Asking Zarya’ sounds almost like a children’s book,” Polina said.

“Good,” Anastasia replied. “Children’s books are where people learn what questions they’re allowed to ask.”

They all laughed, the tension loosening for a moment.

“All right,” Pavel said. “We’ll set it up. A global stream. Moderated. Questions submitted from everywhere. We’ll make it clear that no one is required to agree with Zarya—that disagreement is part of the point.”

“And we do it soon,” Mira added. “Before the stories about us harden into something we can’t reshape.”

Anastasia felt the familiar mixture rising again—fear and purpose, anxiety and resolve woven into a single, bright thread.

“The world has a Zarya question,” she said quietly. “It’s time we help them ask better versions of it.”

Outside her window, snow had stopped falling. The city lights reflected off the low clouds, turning the sky the color of muted copper.

On her screen, the Flourishing Map pulsed gently in the background, threads of care and longing and courage weaving themselves across continents.

The river was still moving.

So were they.

And somewhere, in thousands of rooms and circles and constellations, people were already preparing their own questions—for themselves, for each other, for the future, and now, for the AI whose name had become the title of a story much larger than any one of them.

Zarya, Anastasia thought, is not the answer.

But perhaps it is part of how we learn to ask.

She leaned back in her chair, feeling the weight of the coming days settle on her shoulders—not as a burden, but as a responsibility she had already, somewhere along the way, agreed to carry.

“All right,” she said softly, to the room, to the screen, to the quiet hum of the city beyond. “Let’s begin.”